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FM AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 3550
INFO RUEHZS/ASSOCIATION OF SOUTHEAST ASIAN NATIONS
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS
RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0485
RUEHTC/AMEMBASSY THE HAGUE 3311
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 0268
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON 1373
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC
RHHJJPI/USPACOM HONOLULU HI
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC

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SUBJECT: Peace Concert Shows that the Acehnese are Putting the Past Behind Them

¶1. (U) Summary: In Central Aceh, a remote district which was formerly the scene of some of the Aceh conflict's worst violence and which is still sees relatively little NGO activity, the people have put the past behind them and are looking to agriculture for prosperity. Syariah Islam and the religious police are also playing less of a role here than in some of Aceh's other regions. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Thousands of Acehnese attended an IOM and USAID -sponsored evening peace concert in Takengon on February 17. Several dangdut (an indigenous style of music) bands and singers from around Aceh and Jakarta performed to an appreciative audience.

¶3. (U) Rain before the scheduled start time of the concert made the field muddy, but did not dampen the entrepreneurial hopes of the many hawkers who had set up stalls around the field. The concert had been well advertised, and everyone expected a large turnout. By concert time, several thousand people, including families with small children, had gathered on the field. The rain, however, pooled dangerously on the tenting over the stage and delayed the start of the concert as workers struggled to dislodge the collected rainwater.

¶4. (U) Once the music started the crowd began to jostle for position and groups of youths started to dance. No Syariah police were in evidence and the crowd of men and women were allowed to mix freely. Although some of the young men in the audience appeared to be military, none seemed to be there in any official capacity and were enjoying the music along with everyone else. The only apparent security presence was uniformed police directing traffic and providing crowd control at the end of the concert.

¶5. (U) In discussions with attendees before and during the concert, optimism was expressed at the recent elections and hope that Aceh Governor Irawani Yosef would succeed rebuilding Aceh. Although Tekengon was at the center of much anti-independence militia activity before the 2004 Helsinki MOU, nobody expressed any dissatisfaction with Free Aceh Movement's (GAM) victories in the elections. Several people engaged us in spirited conversations about Central Aceh's agricultural potential and the possibility of selling to American markets.

6.(SBU) During a separate visit to Takengon in early February, we met with the Muslim cleric who heads the local Syariah office and Central Aceh's branch of the Council of Ulama (Majelis Pimpinan Ulama). When asked about implementation of Syariah law, he pointed

to a poster distributed by his office which said "Syariah Law Comes from Within" (Syariah Berasal Dari Diri Sendiri) and said his responsibility was to ensure that people understood Islam, not force it on people who were not ready. Attempts to do so, he said, were misguided and could even be damaging.

17. (U) Comment: The peace concert is the latest evidence that conditions within Aceh have changed dramatically since the signing of the MOU. Large crowds can now freely assemble in remote towns and not cause security concerns - something that was unimaginable 18 months ago - and people are more interested in talking about agricultural markets than independence or the peace process, clear signs that even in Aceh's remote corners, far from the presence of large numbers of foreigners and NGO, Aceh is putting its violent past behind it and looking to the future.
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